

MAY 26, 1977

In 1970 every rural community in the Shortgrass Country except one showed a decline in population. The county I live in had one person per square mile. What concerned me was that we still had the same amount of square miles to gather the sheep and the cattle from, plus about 10 times more brush to work.

By 1970 we'd began to realize that the labor shortage of the 1960s was a joke. It was already so critical that ranchers were on the verge of violating the federal kidnapping law. Without a census report, we knew that we were running out of sheep shearers and other contract help so fast that the welfare office was two months behind counting their applicants.

On top of that, an oil boom was added to the drain on the labor force. Seven or eight dollar an hour jobs put more saddles to hanging in garages and barns rot. The oil activity was good, but the way it changes the roundup scene was tragic.

Last winter, I even got in trouble with the Postal Service trying to hire a cowboy. It wasn't for trying to hire the postmistress, either. He'd worked for us several times throughout the years. One day at the gas station, I asked him whether he'd be free along about the middle of the month.

Warning him that we were going to work was such a mistake that he didn't come to town to pick up his mail for three weeks. The lady at the Post Office told me in no short terms that she was getting plenty tired of tying up newspapers in bundles and trying to stuff letters in his box. I didn't own up to causing the disappearance, but I'm sure she knew I was to blame.

Before he became so wise, I used to lure him to the ranch by asking him to come out a few days to help catch up with the book work. Sort of casual like, I'd say, "Partner, we sure do need someone to do a little light office work. Do bring your saddle in case an old cow gets out in the lane, or we have to gather the worm trap."

Of course the same story won't work many times. I have in other days hired school kids by implying that the ranch was being considered as a location for a western movie. On one occasion, I induces a couple of boys to come out by telling them that my daughter was bringing her roommates home so they could rest up from their beauty pageants. But I never could make that work but once.

Thing is, these modern kids are too smart. Back in the near dark ages of my youth, the principal could have told the seniors that brushing with baking soda would send them straight to Hollywood and the whole class would have ground the enamel from their teeth before they'd have doubted him.

Nowadays, a fellow working a walnut and pea game is going to starve to death. Television shows them everything. I told one of my sons he ought to follow in his old man's footsteps. My wife had to call the doctor to find out how to stop him from hiccoughing. He laughed so hard that caused about as bad a case as you'll ever see.

The pastures are mighty lonely with a couple of men horseback struggling to do five men's work. Gates look awfully narrow when the lambs of the calves break back over the short crews. Corrals that weren't so large get terribly big with a skeleton band to get it done.

Every spring and every fall, the stories become more desperate. Nobody is to blame for the problem. We are going to have to do a lot of smooth talking to ever get them back.